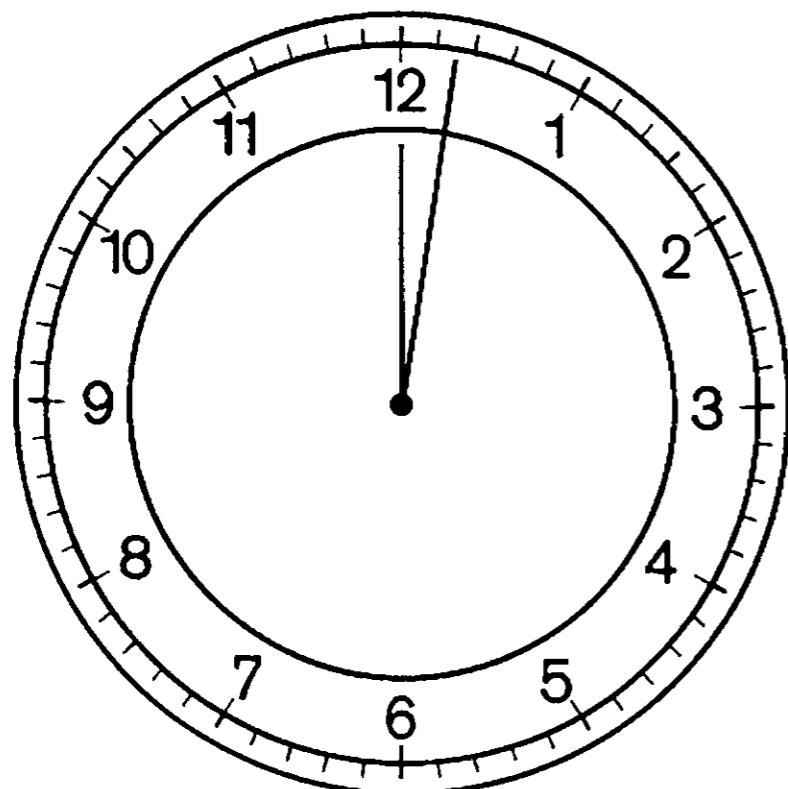


AIR: 24 HOURS
JENNIFER BARTLETT



BY DEBORAH EISENBERG

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CONTENTS

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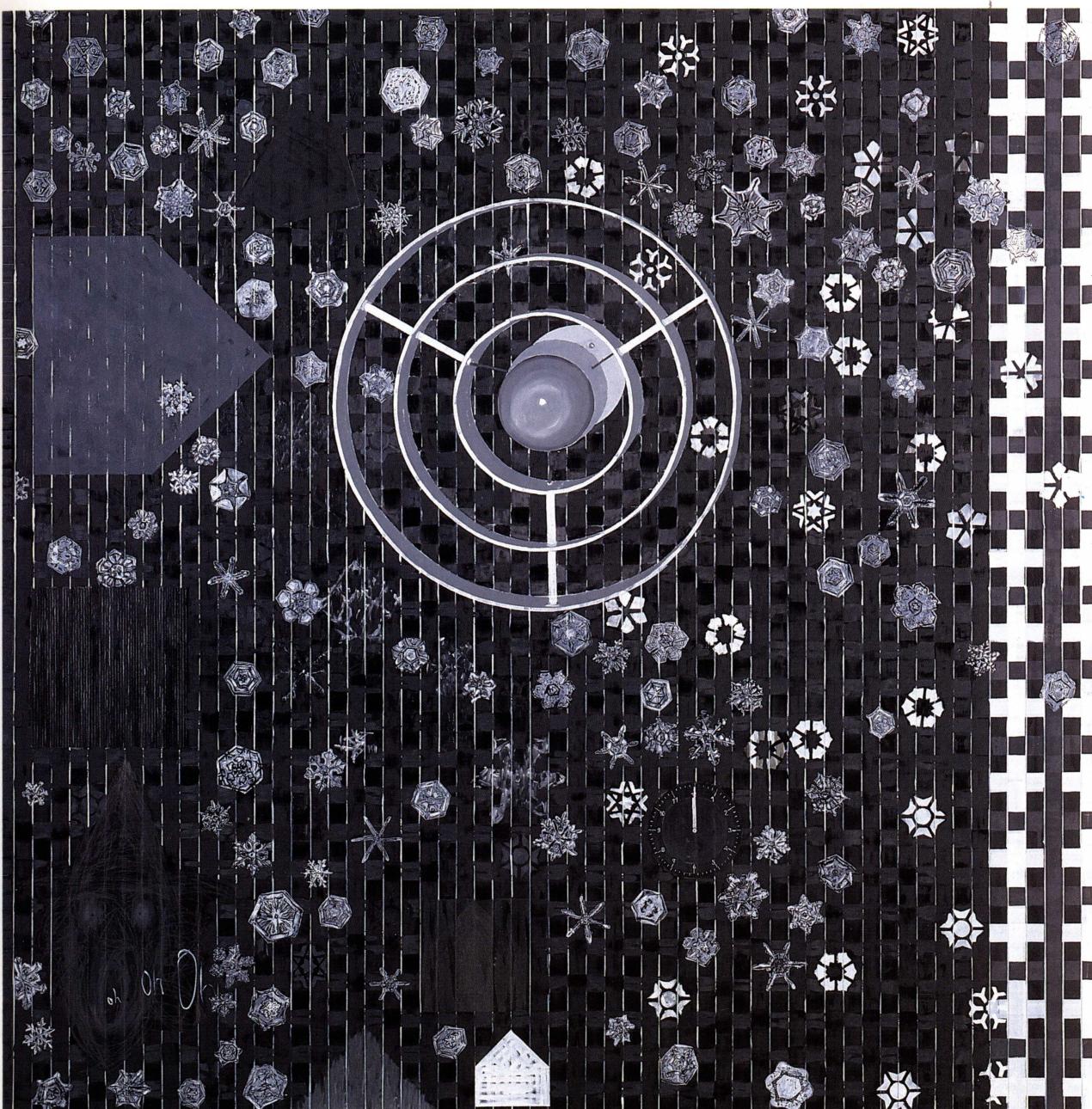
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MIDNIGHT

We are simultaneously below and in front of the scene. The ceiling fixture bears down from overhead, while the woven air behind it emits and absorbs black-and-white snowflakes. The snowflakes seem not only to be falling, but also to be moving toward the right, becoming more abstract, as though they were about to interlock with the six-minute plaid and cause the whole painting to resolve itself into a black-and-white geometry. Watching the snowflakes transmute from natural into stenciled shapes and acquire the abstract and encoded forms of dream images induces a sensation much like the awareness of being overtaken by sleep.

The fabric of the Hour—its black, white, and gray seconds—is almost entirely in evidence, though it is somewhat obscured at moments by the pressing claims of a witch and some houses. The houses appear to be different aspects of one house, seen at differently troubling removes. The smallest, or most distant, comes forward, blocking out the seconds; its ghostly whiteness floats insistently at the bottom of the painting. Of course, the painting can also be understood as an exterior scene—a little house in the nocturnal glare of a ringed planet.

There's an auditory quality to the painting as well—a silence, or muffling of sound. The witch's ooh is a dream sound, possibly the sound we make as we dream her. The painting mimics a shifting precedence between states of consciousness, and there's an alarming dream quality to the simplifying snowflakes and houses, as though, in this moment of insight into the nature of the images at hand, we were giving over our ability to particularize.



ONE A.M.

The flowers are awake and responsive, as though our attention were light. But they appear real in different ways, and if one stares at one blossom for a while then looks at another, one is thrown into confusion. What is inside the house and what is outside is also a bewildering matter. Apparently we are situated in a garden, looking into a window, but the garden air is like wallpaper in places, and beyond the window, screened by the provocative tangle of thorns, there is a pale, living blaze.

The silhouetted figure in the background, which seems to have emerged from the six-minute plaid rather than to be standing in the representational space of the picture, is so insubstantial as to be incorporeal. But the white rose in the foreground is supremely corporeal—its stem looks muscular, and the rose seems to be straining and pointing, perhaps even searching. For the figure?

The grid, as illustrated in the original painting, is pronounced, and its rectilinearity is emphasized by windows and trellises. But the rigidity is counterpointed by the arabesques of the flowers, and there's a feeling of excess and urgency in the pretty garden—summer's rapturous threat of perishability. The cool, restricted colors and yellow and pink accents are also strangely feverish.



TWO A.M.

A painting full of signals and things glimpsed. Our attention is being directed, or diverted, by two largely unseen presences, or possibly by one unseen presence split in half. Everything but the hands is in vertical motion—the red grid and the rising smoke and the brick path, which appears to lead upward rather than back. The clumps of grass themselves seem to be exploding into long, brilliant blades and falling through the air like parachutes, rather than to be growing somewhere.

Both of the hands are left hands, both of the cigarettes are releasing loops of smoke. But the hand on the right side is roughly painted, like a memory of a hand, or a hand's projected future, or the hand of a phantom companion or counterpart. In its wit and elegance this painting seems especially like the exposition of a riddle.



THREE A.M.

If there is in fact an exit here, as the sign sadistically assures us there is, it's more likely to be through the walls—which are the invented or self-generating texture of a dream background—than through the door, with its coffinlike facetings and fittings, and its reversed address. But the advisability of exiting appears to be doubtful in any case; although the doorknob is painted with compelling luster, a yellow light hovering in the right-hand windowpane has a lethal allure, and it seems possible that through the left-hand pane we're witnessing catastrophe.

The scene is so framed that we're prevented from having much of a sense of where our feet are, or, in fact, from seeing the floor at all. But the plunge to it is clearly precipitous, considering how close to the door we're standing. A clownish fuchsia outline around the banister emphasizes the drama.

The disintegrating six-minute plaid is especially interesting in contrast with the lapidary glamour of the *Two A.M.* plaid. Each of these plaids strongly expresses the character of its hour—this one has the familiar 3 A.M. feeling of time decomposing, thinning out into nothing. The morbid, rage-filled jokiness of the painting in no way diminishes its terror, and there's a certain macabre gracefulness about it as well, possibly owing to the two long-eared interlopers with bushy eyebrows, clearly of a child's imagining, who glide forward hand in hand, each with one arm ceremonially raised.



THREE A.M.
1991-92

FOUR A.M.

Our position here is almost the exact reverse of our position at *Three A.M.* Now a stairway descends toward us, and we're looking up at a door whose top we cannot see.

The walls are even less substantial than the walls of *Three A.M.*, and much softer. The rectangles of the grid, too, are more relaxed, broader; the house itself looks blurry with sleep. And here, as at other night Hours, we catch sight of something to which daylight vision is not privy.

But though the walls have the misty, indefinite look of the world just before dawn, the stairs seem to have collected a brilliance from somewhere, and they shine with an intense clarity. Perhaps this enticing appearance is what is seen by the rogue towel—or ghost or soul disguised as a towel, indisputably the most real object in the painting—that goes about its business now, while it has the opportunity.



FOUR A.M.
1991-92

FIVE A.M.

An evanescent vision of adult romance that is certain to evaporate as day becomes dominant. Everything about the scene has the innocence and poignancy of a stolen moment—the fragile light, the fleeting music, dance, and kiss, the intimacy of the drawing, and especially the way the space seems to be constituting itself through processes of vision, memory, comprehension, and conjecture. We are seeing stairs, certainly, but not the way we habitually see stairs. All intervals, distances, and angles seem foreign, even unrelated to one another, as though the materials around us were freshly plastic or as though our eyes were new, or newly awake. The way the six-minute plaid and the seconds intersect with the plane of the floor suggests a precarious tilt—somewhere. The six-minute plaid appears to give onto a world as yet unmanifested, and the discrepancy between the barely visible near-squares of the grid and the near-squares of the floor tiles suggests the provisionality of things coming into being.

The dialogue of child and adult consciousness implied in the previous paintings is explicit here—for all its look of unprecedented experience, there's a quality of sorrow or regret in the picture that causes it to feel less like a child's hope of adulthood than an adult's swift sense-memory of such a hope, relinquished.

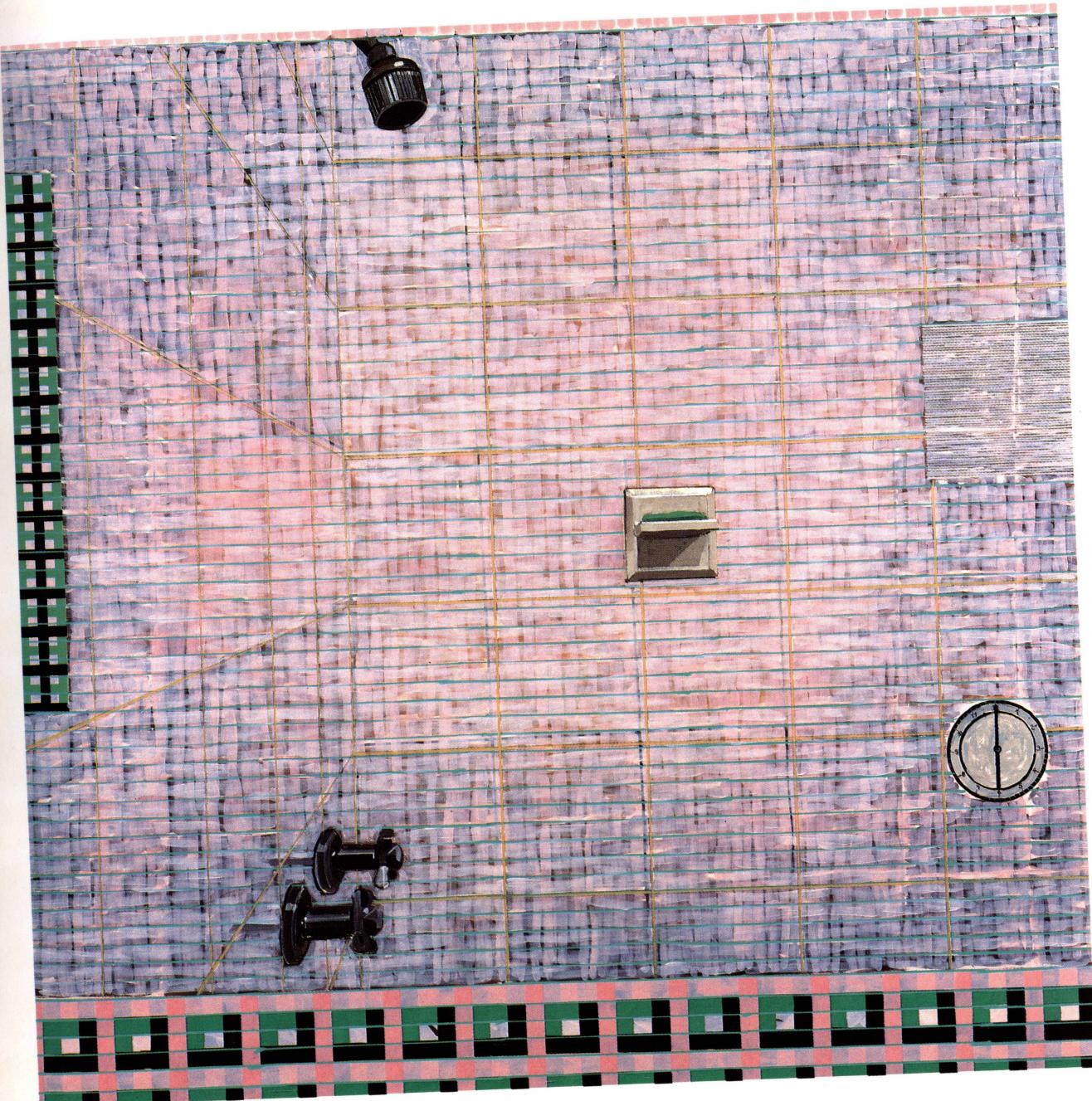


FIVE A.M.
1991-92

SIX A.M.

The first of the daylight Hours, and a more reliable milieu than those of the previous paintings. We know exactly where we are, and the space seems more protective than confining, with its rectilinear focusing and its safe, steamy, daylit pink, green, black, and white. The shower head, handles, and soap dish provide a strict orientation, like cardinal points, and also function a little like the moustache doodled onto the pretty girl in an advertising poster, changing the character of the picture from one sort of thing into another—in this case from entirely abstract to entirely literal.

There are no visions here, or portents, but even this painting has an unruly animate quality. The shower's embrace is decidedly mammalian—the head peers, the handles are breastlike, and the embryonic bar of soap lies sleepily in its dish.



SIX A.M.
1991-92

SEVEN A.M.

This painting, like *Midnight*, simulates or activates a shift of consciousness. Here we see consciousness gathering itself and disengaging from its material surroundings in preparation for work. The flow of water into the drain is hypnotizing; the air is all watery shadows and reflections. As we stare at the water, several things occur at the periphery of our attention: Two palettes, as yet perfectly clean, rise in unlikely space, and a rhinestone tiara, swifter in motion, but more securely situated, flies by like an idea. On its way down the drain?

Part of the painting is one's missing self. How is it possible to be bending over the sink like this and yet not to appear in the mirror, where the hairbrush, its shadow, the towel, and a good part of the sink are reflected. The act of mind—something that all the paintings treat—is underscored here by the absent body.



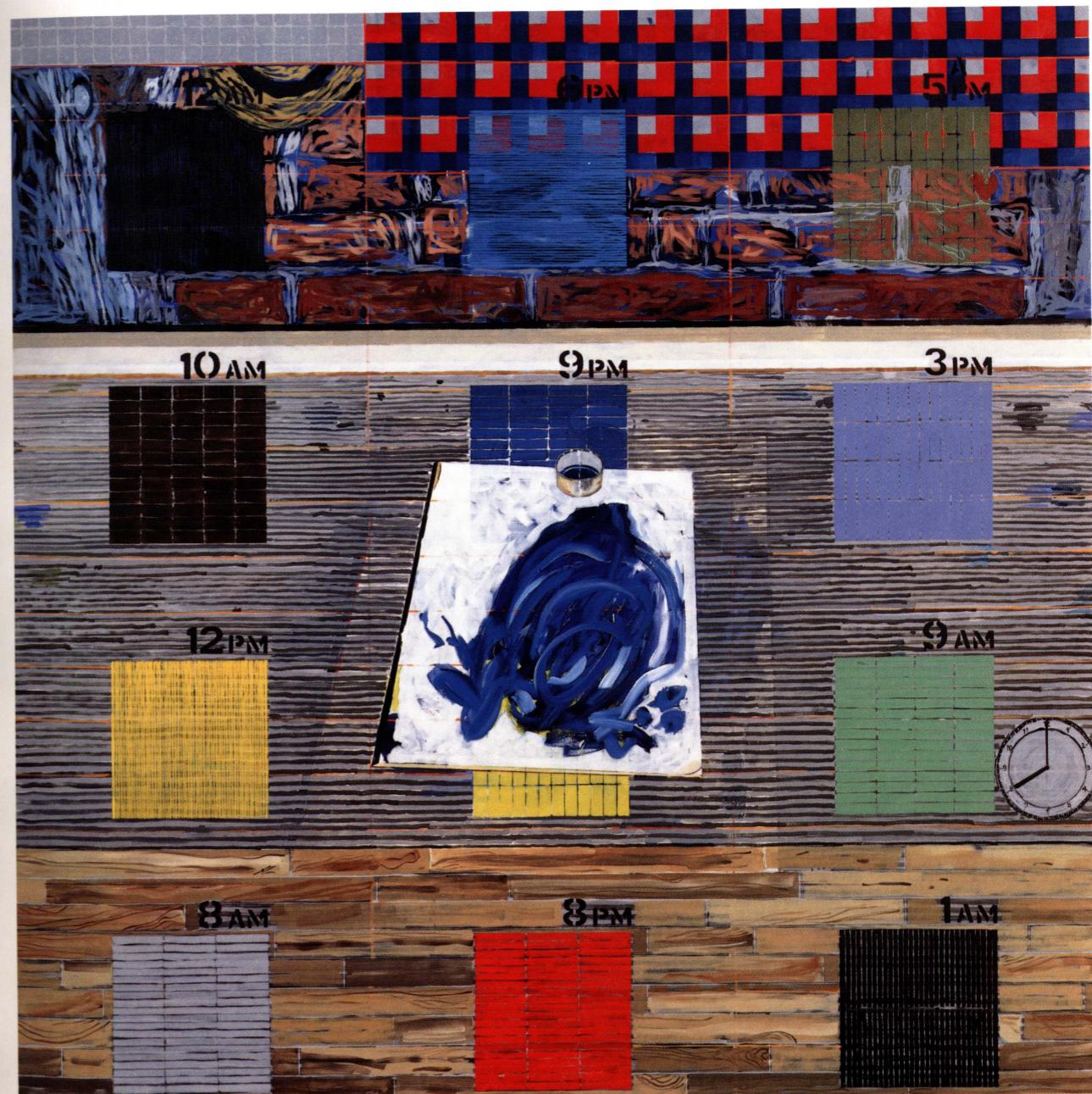
SEVEN A.M.
1991-92

EIGHT A.M.

The diffuse concentration of the previous hour has become focused here on work. The palette, with its blue paint, is engaged now, and stationary, more or less in the center of the picture. The top quarter of the painting is occupied by the bottom of the *Nine P.M.* painting.

Twelve of the original paintings—including, of course, the original painting of *Eight A.M.* itself—hover between the palette and the studio floor and wall; clearly attention to any one of the paintings entails awareness of the others.

Matters are intensely complicated within the image of *Nine P.M.*—the seconds and the minute plaid belong to *Eight A.M.*, not *Nine P.M.*, and the original painting of *Midnight*, which is not, of course, part of the actual *Nine P.M.* painting, has a corner tucked behind *Nine P.M.*'s hat! But the mood of *Eight A.M.* is orderly and well under control, with all of its squares and horizontal divisions. The few curving lines that appear at all are part of *Nine P.M.*, not (strictly) *Eight A.M.*, excepting the swirl of blue paint, which seems all the more alive and potent for the regulation of its environment. Behind the palette there are the traces of the palette from a larger previous incarnation, causing the painting to seem something like a double exposure—the simultaneous expression of two separate moments, or an eclipsed possibility.

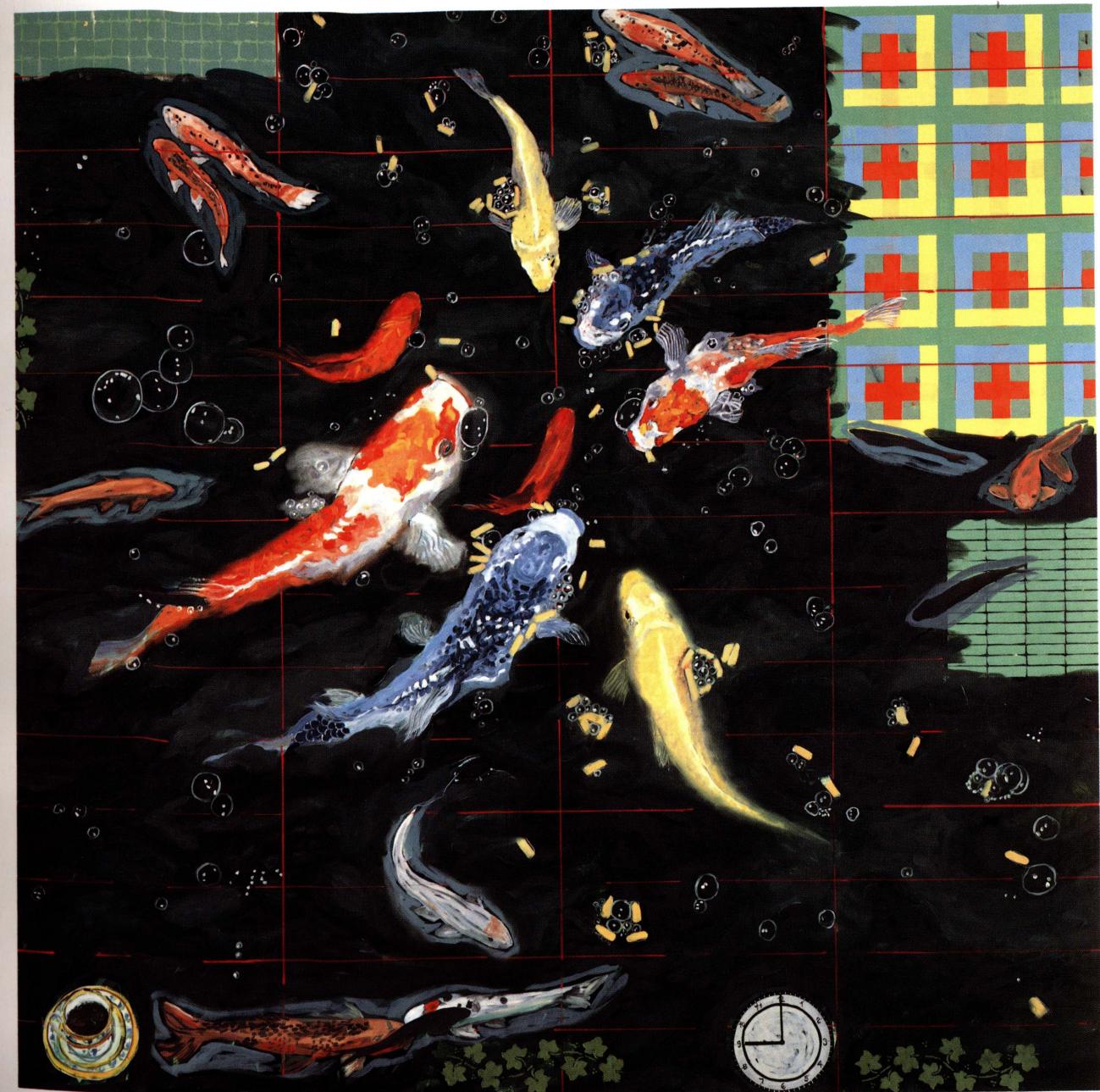


EIGHT A.M.
1991-92

NINE A.M.

The ravishing colors and the pleasingness of porcelain, leaves, water, and goldfish are undermined by a faint, pervasive atmosphere of tension. The harmony with which disjunctive orders of reality are incorporated into the picture is, itself, jarring. Nearly photorealistic bubbles along with stenciled leaves, painstakingly articulated fish and others that are no more than a brushstroke—it all looks right but imposes a bit of strain on the very sort of visual propriety the scene suggests. The disproportionately small coffee cup, unattended in the lower left-hand corner, is almost exactly the size and shape of the clock, and seems like a cue that sets off an uncontrollable scale—who knows how big these nervously clustering fish will be in a few more hours?

Perhaps the most unsettling thing about the painting is the rather grim frankness of its artifice—the water at first glance appears to be deep and mysterious, but where it laps over the time keys, we see that it's just a layer of paint. And the grid lies between the surface of the water and the fish, separating one from the other, and even, in places, giving the water the appearance of a solid brick wall.



NINE A.M.
1991-92

TEN A.M.

Next to the prim *nicotiana* in their pots, the writhing and tortuous clumps of heather seem unleashed. The regular, brick-shaped grid subtly overlays the painting, but the bricks of the path seem to be slanting down to pry us up into the picture, and the heather has some of the searching aggressivity of the *One A.M.* white rose. The space of the painting is warped, as though the roots of the heather plants were working away just beneath its surface, and the peculiar pink light appears to augment the power of the heather, extending its reach into long, feathery shadows.

All this growth has a brute vitality, independent of mind, and if the other paintings in the cycle describe the wayward psychological dynamism of a given moment, this one insists on a transfixed, almost drugged, gaze. It is particularly noticeable, perhaps, in this painting that the clocks in no way partake of an Hour's idiom.

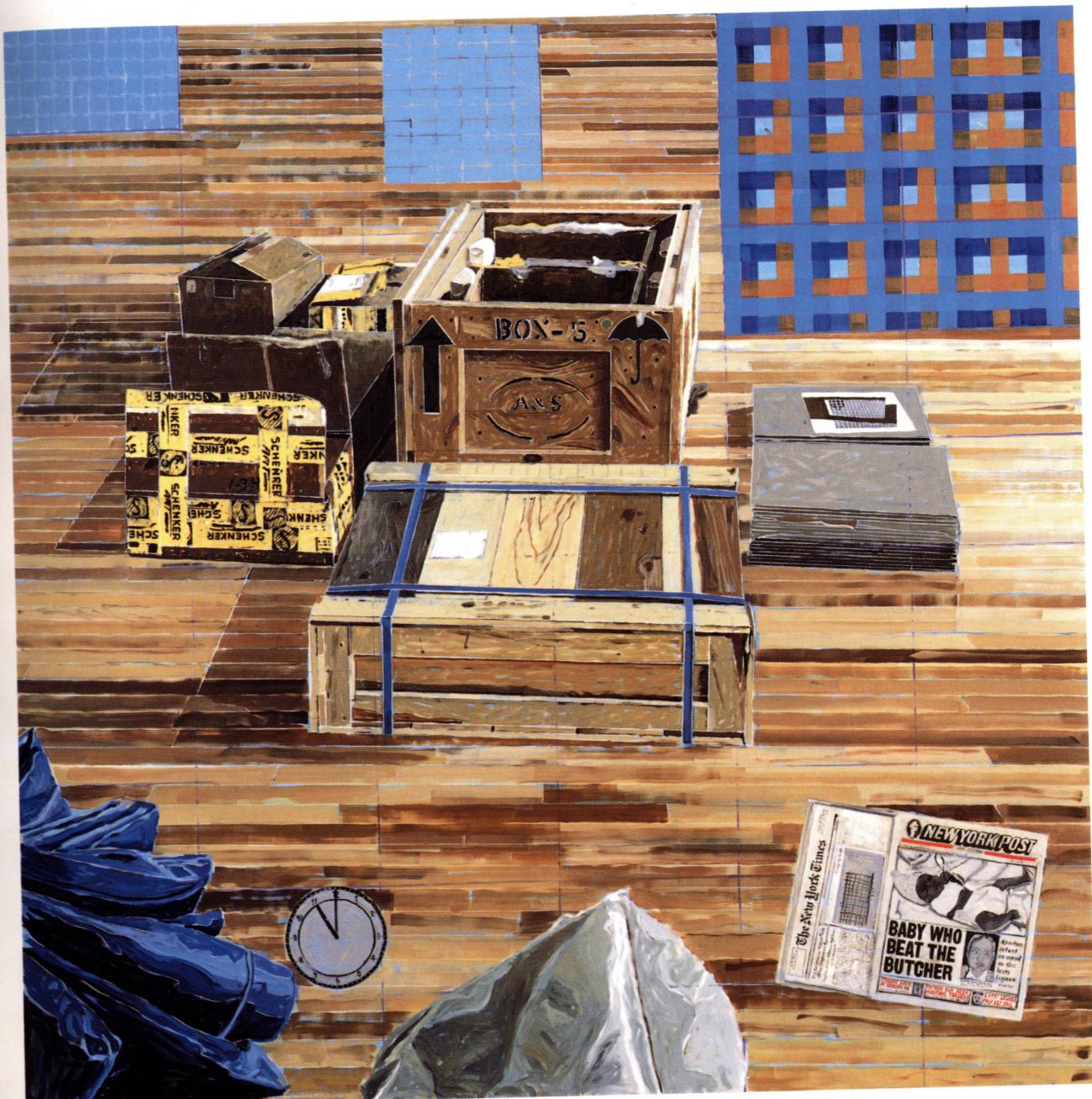


TEN A.M.
1991-92

ELEVEN A.M.

Were it not for the lettering on the newspapers and boxes this painting might appear to be strictly a severe exercise in color and composition. But as it is, we recognize almost immediately that this assemblage of apparently banal objects is a town, casting long, late-morning shadows. *Midnight's* houses reappear here in the light, for inspection, but although we can now see the exteriors clearly, even where the windows face us or a roof has come off completely, the interiors are obscure or mystifying. The house/carton in the foreground is tightly sealed, but the roofs are lifting from two of the others, and even the six-minute plaid, going a bit wild as it does on the right, makes a tantalizing suggestion of revelation. The plaid also seems to allow us to see right through the floor (or earth) into an infinite sky (or ocean) and the crumpled blue and white materials are looming and observant.

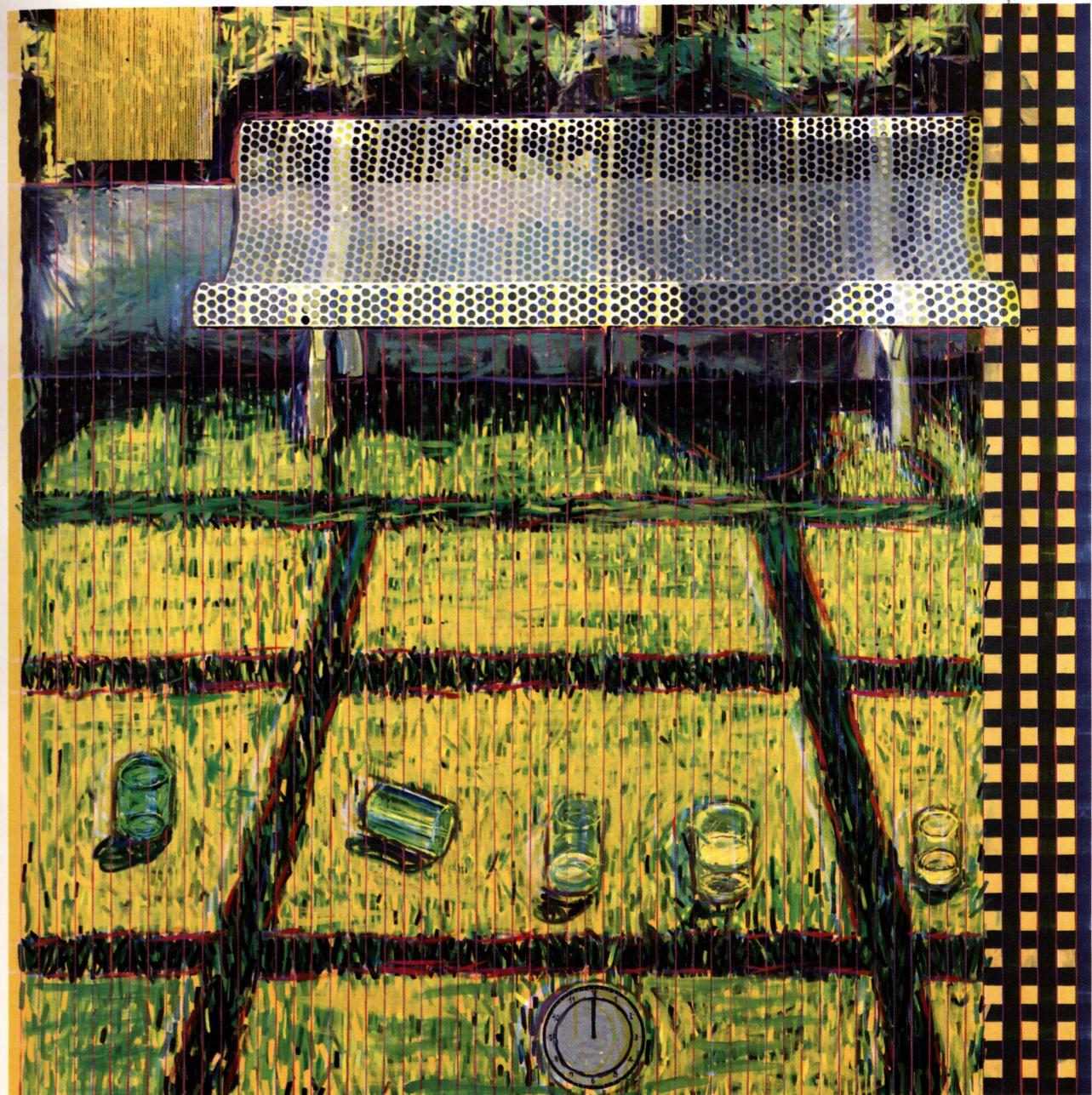
An ineffectual issue of *The New York Times* lies under a copy of the more strident *Post*, whose cretinous and repulsive, but extremely effective, front page is turned right to us. The headline and story seem to be completely at odds with the quiet studio scene and the small town, and yet . . .



ELEVEN A.M.
1991-92

TWELVE NOON

The complete inversion of what ought to be a scene of languorous pleasure. An empty bench—almost always a beckoning sight, a repository of nostalgia and yearning—looks wicked here, and dangerous. Perhaps a tribunal is expected to convene on it soon, or perhaps it's an instrument of torture. The midday light is acid, the shadows that fall across the lawn (echoes of the bands around the crate in the previous Hour) conduct us inevitably to the bench and appear to be cast by a barred window. The glasses look like they've been forgotten abruptly in the course of a quarrel or a disappointment, but one is not particularly tempted to speculate on the nature of the episode—what is fascinating about the glasses is their catalytic effect: The time they refer to is in the past of the painting; they seem to be counters in an abandoned game, or signals—like the coffee cup at *Nine A.M.*, they seem to have triggered the event that is the painting, both in the mind of the painter and of the viewer.

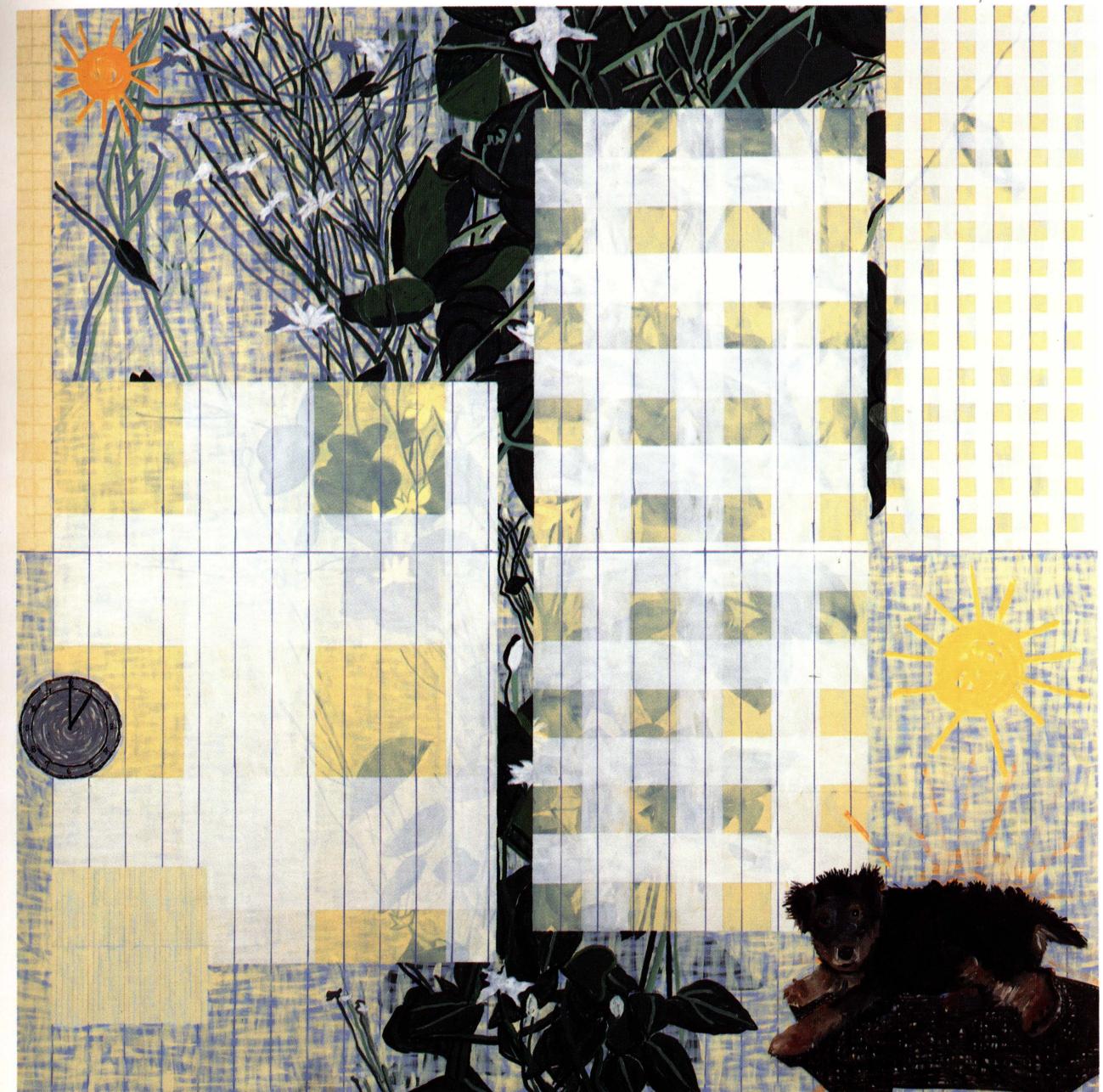


ONE P.M.

The white, yellow, and green of *Noon* have been blanched and purified in this very inactive moment of the day. Panels of sunlight in the form of the six-minute plaid and slowly advancing enlargements of it veil a flowering vine; the marks of the narrow blue grid as they fall over each incarnation of the plaid cause each to look like a slightly different configuration. Behind the vine, the air is suffused with wispy light, more or less the consistency and texture of the white house at *Midnight* and many other solid walls that appear throughout the cycle.

The gigantic vine and the tiny dog each has its own sun, appropriate in size. There's a degree of reproach in the dog's puzzled gaze as it stares at us from the strange woolly patch where it is marooned—the dog seems to feel it's telling us something which we, inexplicably, fail to grasp.

What is substance and what is not is examined once again here, and we're asked to be aware of the seen thing as a function of seeing, of vision as active and searching rather than as automatic or given.



TWO P.M.

Although this painting looks nothing like *Seven A.M.*, it sets in motion a similar mental process. One's gaze becomes fixed—like a longing—on the sequestered vista: the sunlight, the shadows, the tree; the rest of one's vision disassembles. One's attention, flexible and disengaged, is receptive to stray impressions that are likely to be blocked or stored at other times. This is the only moment of the cycle with a door that invites rather than menaces. A door it is, nonetheless.

As at *Noon* and *One P.M.*, we're looking through a lattice. The grid holds us at a distance from the room, the casement from the view. But a book presents itself in front of all obstructions, and opens. In supple line drawings, animals scamper across the book's landscape and look as though they're likely to escape into the dozy, slightly petrified room. The curve of the tree, itself confined to a remote exterior compartment, responds to the monkey's reaching arm. The complex six-minute plaid is filled with possibilities—an enlarged alternative patch of it swings forward.

It's easy to fall into sympathy with the other observer, the stenciled turtle who contemplates the scene from beneath the original painting; and seeing them as the turtle does, the various contemporaneous aspects of the Hour—courtyard, plaid, room, and story—seem equally foreign and inscrutable.



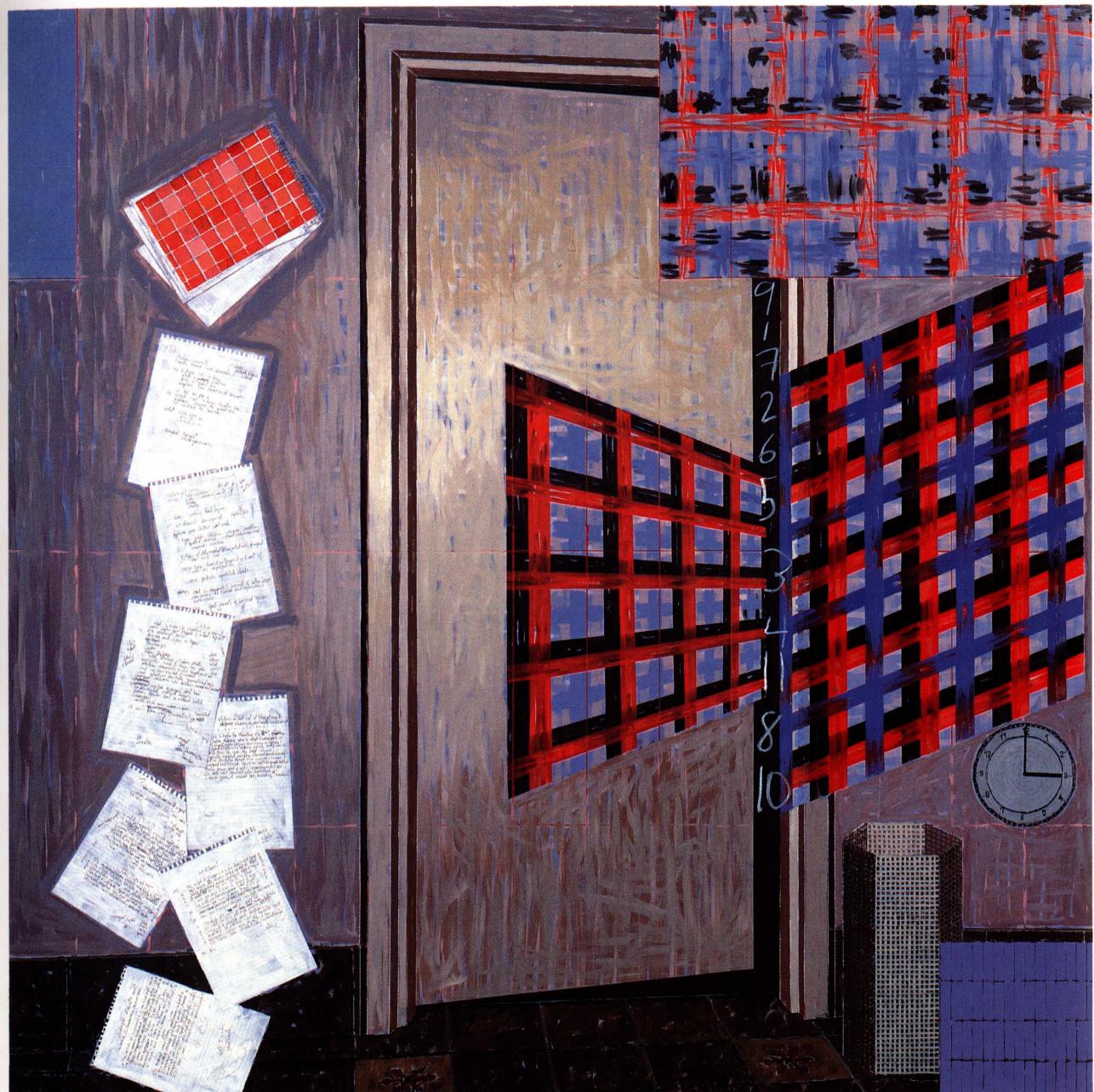
TWO P.M.
1991-92

THREE P.M.

Many of the aspects of this Hour are familiar from previous Hours: The weblike walls, the inhospitable door, the conceit that the grid is a construction material, the unstable and transmogrifying six-minute plaid, and the perforated metal surface.

This is more of a child's 3 P.M. than an adult's, with its spiral notebook and its numbers, the volatile after-school boredom that flares into intense anxiety, the aimless, unsupervised compost of time that's about to rot in place. When is the sonnet occurring? The relationship of one expression of time to another here has a hypothetical quality much like the spatial relationships in many of these paintings.

The "real" plaid decomposes, leaving impersonator plaids to sneak into, or out of, the door. The falling pages of the notebook contain drafts of a sonnet that make references to various images from the cycle—houses, the witch, money, and snowflakes. It is perfectly possible to read the umbrella stand as a skyscraper, a reading which converts the painting into a claustrophobic and irradiated landscape.

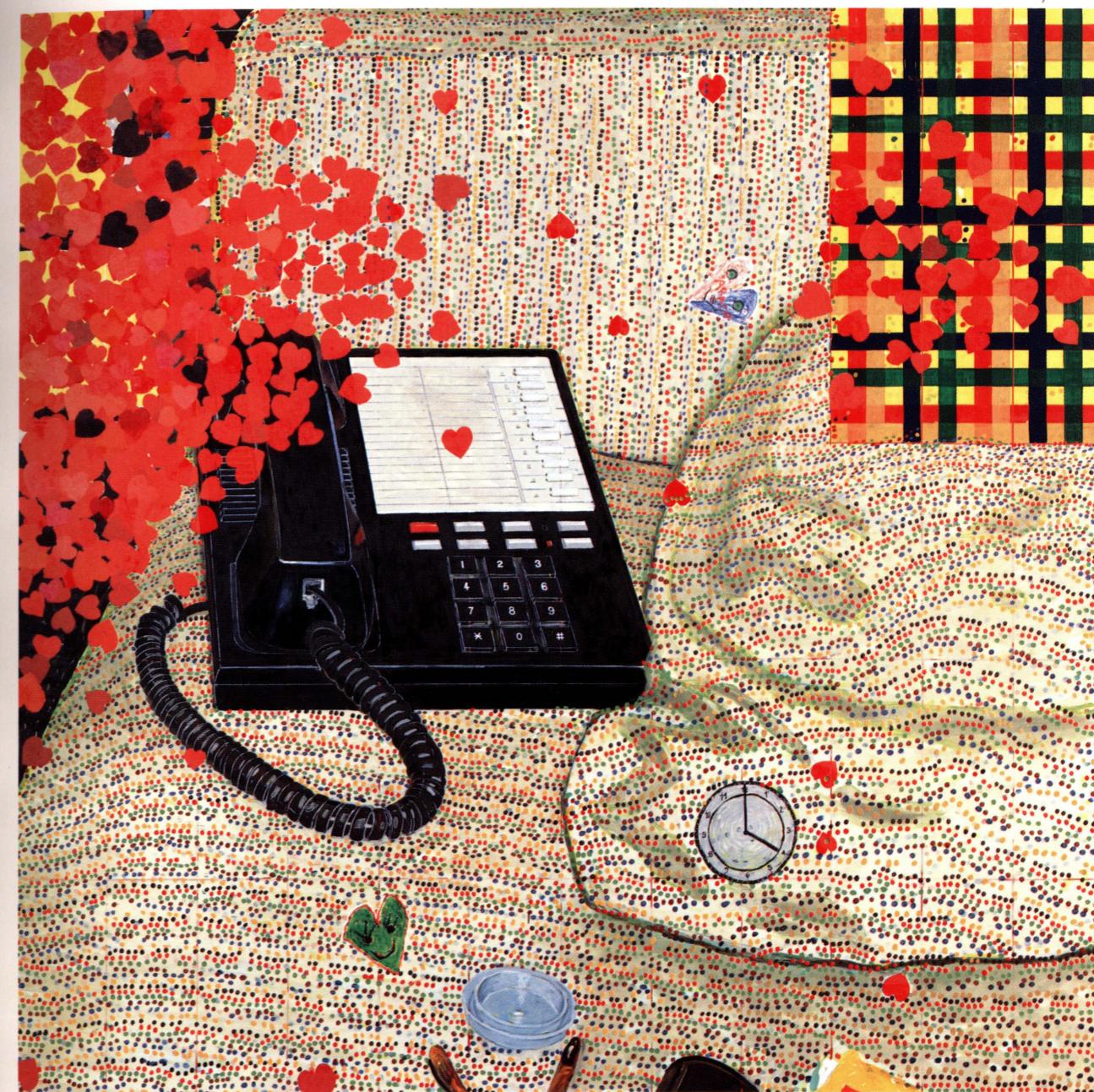


THREE P.M.
1991-92

FOUR P.M.

We're on some piece of furniture, staring, like it or not, at a phone. The phone that demands our attention is in turn being hectored by a plague of nasty little hearts, which also, presumably, mask the seconds and the original painting. Stray hearts attack the six-minute plaid where they appear to be feeding on some dots which have come loose from the fabric of the furniture covering. Two child's drawings of hearts distinguish themselves, as rigidly smiling faces. The white panel on the phone could be seen as a page of the *Three P.M.* sonnet, domesticated.

The framing of the scene is quintessentially Bartlett—some one-celled tendency dragged up from a prehistoric cave in the mind and displayed—for mockery, pity, or pure scientific scrutiny. Is it the fact that we can look only at the phone that makes it impossible for us to identify the objects at the bottom of the painting and even the piece of furniture on which we find ourselves? That seems to be the case.



FOUR P.M.
1991-92

FIVE P.M.

Nine A.M.'s fish have become smaller, not larger; now it is the ghostly leaves of the lily pads that are enormous, and devouring. The clock sits exactly where *Nine A.M.*'s coffee cup sat, and the little stenciled leaves, which in *Nine A.M.* appeared to have unwound themselves in garlands from the porcelain cup, are more natural here, and scattered. Although the intense, mysterious colors are a variant of the colors of *Nine A.M.*, this painting recalls *Midnight* more strongly, with its concentric whorls, balancings of overall activity, rich, shifting textures, and the hinged planes of its surface.

The only black fish in the painting swims like a phantom across the center, blocking from our view the meeting between an orange fish and a white fish. In the ten grid divisions at the bottom of the painting there is an odd little joke—one clock followed by nine stones. The whole arrangement of the painting, the contrasts between the leaves, the fish, and the heavy, volumetric stones, invites meditation.



SIX P.M.

A painting that becomes more puzzling and more resistant the longer one looks. The scene is straightforward enough—or so one would think: A swimming pool, a strip of tile floor on either side of the pool, and a window at the rear of the room. But the lateral bands that make up the picture contain information that's related in odd ways, and it's difficult to tell surface from surface—glass, water, air, shadows, reflections, everything is wavering and uncertainties. Where are the beach balls, where are our eyes, and where on earth can we be standing?

This is the beginning of night, the first dark clock face since *Five A.M.* But in the serene and delicious melancholy of the summer evening, the unavoidable fact of the painting is the open scissors. The fleur-de-lis pattern on the tiles (which appears also at *Three P.M.*) is easily identified on the left. But on the right, just at the point of one of the scissor's blades, the form is convex, glistening, and slightly smeared, like blood.



SEVEN P.M.

A dressing table full of shiny, attractive things. Its mood is very different from the elegy of *Five A.M.*, but the paintings are similar in the overlapping dialogue between childhood and adulthood. What we are looking at here is as much the child's vicarious anticipation of the mother's evening out as the memory of such anticipation, which informs the adult's preparation for the evening. Both child and adult are represented in the reminder to buy sneakers and perfume.

Most of the objects in the picture have the slightly exaggerated stature of the officially beautiful—even the shoe trees look monumental and luscious—except for the photograph in the background, which is full of anarchic snapshot dishevelment and clamor. A child, imprisoned in the silver frame, looks right at us from her black-and-white distance in time. We remember her, now, as straining against some sort of rope, calling.



SEVEN P.M.
1991-92

EIGHT P.M.

The plaid rug echoes the plunging lattices of earlier hours and appears to be constructed of girders and tracks, as though the red ground lies far below. A chunk of six-minute plaid intrudes on the tea party. The pillows and blankets display different orders of transparency and floatiness. There is an isolated penny on the blanket, an isolated figure on the sheet. The tea set is like a little china litter spawned by the *Nine A.M.* coffee cup, the goldfish crackers are memory-like vestiges of the *Nine A.M.* and *Five P.M.* goldfish. The chessmen cookies on the tiny plates look like Tarot cards. The table holds an assortment of objects, ritualistic essences of the objects on the previous Hour's adult dressing table. The portrait of Gorbachev stares out past us at something we cannot see, and there is a photograph of a child—presumably the same child we encountered at *Seven P.M.*—tacked into the corner of his frame; here the child is in color, and indistinct.

Everything seems saturated with opaque significance, like clues, or false clues. But the central and shocking image in the picture is the black doll, wearing a dress of sacrificial white. Her eyes are closed, her mouth is open, her hands reach, and her hair flies back as though she has been hurled from a height, but we see her with complete clarity in her frozen descent. The figures on the lunch box look on at a slant from their festive pink surfaces. The large figures are white, the small ones, colored. Their attitude is inscrutable—are they witnesses, or participants, or captives? Do they comprehend what is going on in the room, or not? The three "human" figures—the doll, Gorbachev, and the photograph—are positioned in an aligned slant of their own, opposite to the slant of the lunch box.



NINE P.M.

We seem to be watching a morality play featuring a hose and an innocent little flirty, beribboned hat—a ceremony of the garden to be enacted nightly, forever. Offstage, everything is much less predictable. This is one of the few paintings in the cycle that allows us into unrestricted and uncontrolled space. We cannot even be certain what is space and what is not; most of what we can see beyond the brick stage appears to be reflection. As to what is actually there—what surface is doing the reflecting, for instance—we are given no information. There is a feeling here, unique in the cycle, of exploration and possibility, however hazardous. There is something grand, almost calm, about the living darkness. In this picture the object of scrutiny is not the uncanniness in familiar forms—the hat and the hose are quite openly costumes, or roles—but that which is palpable and unseen.



NINE P.M.
1991-92

TEN P.M.

A picture dominated by an implied presence, or presences. Somebody has been, or will be, propped up against the pillow, facing us; a glass of wine sits next to the phone, waiting. Perhaps the person is ourself—the bed and the wineglass are clearly an invitation, or a challenge.

The bed itself is shooting forward, or possibly backward, along the floorboards. The pillows, bedspread, wall, and yellow blanket are among the most spectral substances in the cycle. The elegantly interlocking rectangles of the top quarter of the painting seem to be in the process of posing and solving problems. The six-minute plaid gives onto an infinite night beyond the painting. The logs in the foreground are split; the grain of the wood is teasingly exposed, almost legible. The real clock behind the bed proves that ten o'clock is the real time, as well as the painting's time, reinforcing the impression that we're inside the picture. The painting seems to be a presentation of evidence (possibly including ourself) to be examined by the person (possibly ourself) now absent from the bed.

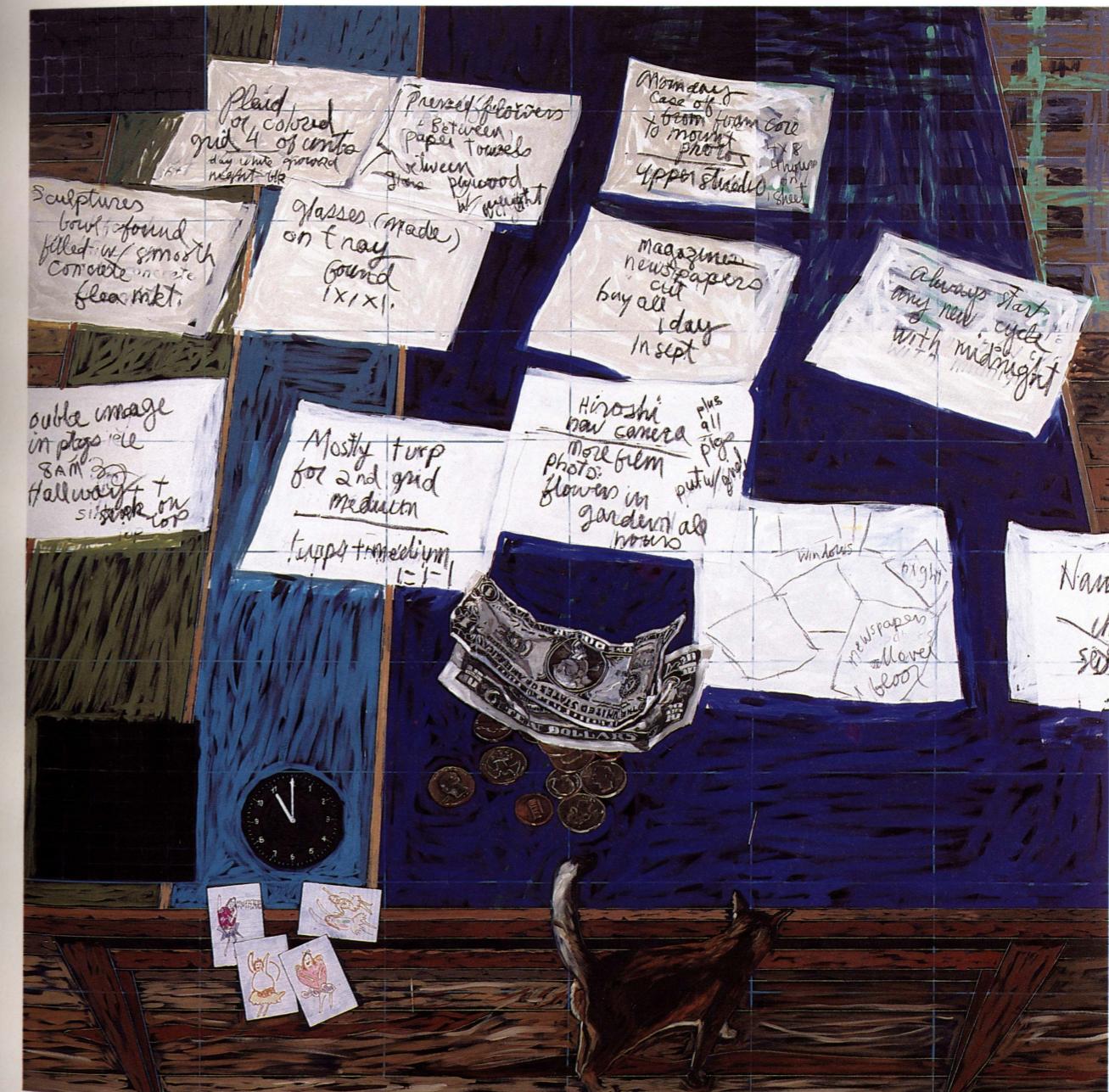


ELEVEN P.M.

We're in at least as strange a relationship to this picture—or to its different elements—as we were to *Six P.M.*, *Nine P.M.*, and *Ten P.M.* How tall is the table? How tall is the cat? We seem to be seeing everything as if we were ourselves and also, for example, a cat.

The huge notes, vibrating off the table, which we happen to be able to read but not exactly to comprehend (as if we were ourselves and a cat) seem mostly to refer to these paintings. The four children's drawings that occupy some space other than the space of the table are child-notes and also recall the Tarot card chessmen cookies of *Eight P.M.* The money looks absolutely real and luridly familiar—here, at least, is something that we can, in some sense, understand.

The table is roughly painted but seemingly solid except where the exhausted-looking six-minute plaid becomes amalgamated with it. The painting seems to be flying up, destabilizing, twisting out from under our control, blending, altering, and combining its substances, as things do when our conscious mind becomes too tired to stand guard. There seems no choice but to continue to *Midnight*, as one of the notes instructs.



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